

Parshiot Nitzavim - Vayelech, 5773, 2013:

Standing Before G-d – in His Divine Image

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

You are all standing this day before the L-rd, your G-d, the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers, that you may enter the covenant of the L-rd, your G-d, and His oath, which the L-rd, your G-d, is making with you this day. (*Sefer Devarim* 29:9-11, this, and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This passage contains the opening verses of our *parasha* (Torah portion). Since the phrase “You are all” is employed, the words “the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers” appear to be completely superfluous. In other words, the passage could easily have been written: “You are all standing this day before the L-rd, your G-d, that you may enter the covenant of the L-rd, your G-d, and His oath, which the L-rd, your G-d, is making with you this day.” Since this is the case, we may ask two separate, but closely related, questions: “Why did the Torah enumerate all of these categories?” and “What was the Torah trying to communicate to us by adopting such an unusual degree of specificity?”

In my view, the best way to answer both of these questions is to turn to two well-known verses that appear in *Sefer Bereishit* 1: 26-27: “And G-d said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of

the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.’ And G-d created man in His image; in the image of G-d He created him; male and female He created them.” One is immediately struck by the threefold use of the word “image” (*tzelem*). As the Torah is nearly always sparing in its words, the repetition of this term must be singularly important.

What does it mean to be created *b’tzelem Elokim* (in G-d’s image)? The answer, as in many theological questions, is that it depends upon who you ask. Our Sages took diverse approaches in responding to this crucial question. Some, such as Hillel in *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 34, and Rabbi Bena’*a* in *Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra* 58a, believed that “And G-d created man in His image” is to be taken literally. In their view, as amazing as it may seem, we look like G-d. The more widely accepted approach, however, is to reject any potential physical comparison to Hashem (since He has no form) and, instead, to focus upon the abilities that G-d bestowed upon us which make us “similar” to Him. The most prominent of these gifts, according to the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) and his followers, is our intellect (*hasagah sichlit*):

Now man possesses as his proprium [unique talent and gift] something in him that is very strange as it is not found in anything else that exists under the sphere of the moon, namely, intellectual apprehension. In the exercise of this, no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used; and therefore this apprehension was likened unto the apprehension of the deity, which does not require an instrument, although in reality it is not like the latter apprehension, but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion. It was because of this something, I mean because of the divine intellect conjoined with man, that it is said of the latter that he is *in the image of G-d and in His likeness*, not that G-d, may He be exalted, is a body and possesses a shape. (*The Guide for the Perplexed* I: 1, translation, Shlomo Pines, p.23)

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), built upon this passage and portrayed the concept of the “image of G-d” in the following fashion:

There is no doubt that the term “image of G-d” in the first account [i.e. *Sefer Bereishit* 1: 26-27] refers to man’s inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Man’s likeness to G-d expresses itself in man’s striving and ability to be a creator. Adam the first who was fashioned in the image of G-d was blessed with a great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal, the most outstanding of which is the intelligence, the human mind, capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings. (*The Lonely Man of Faith*, Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought, Volume 7, No. 2, 1965)

Whatever the exact meaning of “image of G-d” may be, one thing is crystal clear: every human being is potentially holy and of boundless significance, since he or she has been created in the image of the Almighty. Indeed, in a specifically Jewish legal context, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) focused upon the irreplaceable value of each individual among the Jewish people. The last Mishnah in the fourth chapter of tractate *Sanhedrin* deals with the technical topic of how to guarantee the veracity of would-be witnesses. Herein, we are taught one of the most fundamental concepts of Judaism, namely, the sanctity of the individual:

Therefore, man was created alone to teach you that anyone who destroys even one soul (individual) from the Jewish people is considered by the Torah as if he has destroyed an entire world. [So, too,] anyone who saves even one soul (individual) from the Jewish people is considered by the Torah as if he has saved an entire world.

The world-renowned Talmud commentator, Rabbeinu Shmuel Eliezer Ben-Yehudah Halevi Edels (known as the Maharsha, 1555-1631) analyzes the above passage and suggests the following deeply insightful interpretation:

The phrase in the Mishnah is very exact when it states: “*nefesh achat m'yisrael*” (one soul from the Jewish people) since the form of man who was created alone is the image of G-d, the One of the world...

The Maharsha, by focusing upon the word “*nefesh*” and its connection to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (The Holy One Blessed be He), is urging us to recognize the stamp of Hashem that is uniquely engraved upon each and every member of the Jewish people.

This concept has profound ramifications. In a word, when we interact with our fellow Jews, we are duty bound to remember that we are communicating with someone who bears the stamp of our Creator upon him.

I believe we are now in an ideal position to answer the questions with which we began: “Why did the Torah enumerate all of these categories?” and “What was the Torah trying to communicate to us by adopting such an unusual degree of specificity?” Based upon our examination, the phrase “the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers” now emerges as anything but redundant. It is, instead, teaching us a crucial lesson concerning the irreplaceable importance of all Jews. It is teaching us that, irrespective as to whether our fellow Jew is a leader of our people or a common manual laborer, i.e. regardless of the person’s social and economic status or level of education, he is *kadosh* (holy) since he is, in truth, G-d’s representative in this world. As such, he embodies unlimited potential and value – and deserves to be treated in kind.

We live in a time when many of us focus upon the commandments that obtain between G-d and ourselves (*mitzvot bein adam l’makom*). Thus, we are often meticulous in our observance of such mitzvot as kashrut, tefillin, succah, mezuzah, and Shabbat. When it comes to commandments between our fellow Jews and ourselves (*mitzvot bein adam l’chaveiro*), however, we may be far less exact and demanding of ourselves. As a result, angry biting words, wounding sarcasm, bitter cynicism, *lashon hara* (deprecatory - but true – speech), and even *divrei bushah* (public embarrassment of others) are far too

common occurrences in our daily lives. Therefore, we must remember the words “You are all standing this day before the L-rd, your G-d,” and that we are all created in His divine image. If we can do this - and the month of Elul is preeminently the time to do so - then we will be able to act differently toward one another and be better prepared for the potentially transformative moments of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. With Hashem’s help, may it be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

N.B. Part of my summary of the various approaches to understanding the term “*tzelem Elokim*” is based upon Rabbi David Silverberg’s excellent article entitled: “Tzelem Elokim: Image or Imagery?” which may be found at: <http://haretzion.org/alei/1-5tzele.htm>.

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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